[Rich and Lula Gray]

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Rich and Lula Gray (Negro)

[South?] Florida Turpentine Corporation

Carters, Florida (Near Lakeland)

Negro Turpentine Foreman

[Paul?] Diggs, writer (Negro)

Veronica [?]. [Russ?], revisor. [?]

[RICH AND LULA GRAY?]

A small Coca-cola sign, tacked to a shack at Carters, Florida, and bearing the name of Lula Gray, led me to the quarter house of the Negro camp foreman, Rich Gray. Rich works for the South Florida Turpentine Corporation. Lula is his wife. Their small home once served as a home and store combined. It is reached from the main highway by planks over a ditch.

Rich was not at home, but Lula invited me to come up on the little vine covered porch and wait for him. [She?] told me that he came in from the wood every day for his noon meal, and as it was near that time, I accepted the invitation. I sat in the swing and shoved the one rocker on the porch with the toe of my shoe. Lula was busy in the kitchen cooking, so I didn't have much time to talk with her, but I managed to ask her where she was from.

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[“I'se?] from [Hanna?], South Carolina,” she said, and I'm 37 years old. [But?] of course this yere age what I jest give you haint what my [insurance?] age is!”

I asked her to explain.

“Well, the reason is that hit doon cost us so much if 2 we's younger.”

The shack housing the Gray's is one of 40 dilapidated quarter houses furnished turpentine laborers. Situated on old highway [17?], seven miles from Lakeland, the camp is one of the oldest in the vicinity.

Weather-beaten and almost black, the majority of these pine-board shacks are not even equipped with shutters and porches. They are built on the low flat lands beneath tall pines, and the spacious yards are flooded during the rainy season. The sandy streets of the settlement are deeply grated on either side, to aid in drainage during wet weather.

Lula showed me their three room house. The interior was not ceiled but it was clean and neatly kept. Pretty curtains hung at the few windows and the cheap furniture was well arranged. The kitchen was also clean and I noticed a bright oil cloth on the table.

In the backyard there were a few chickens running about. The out-house, about thirty feet back of the house, was crudely built of old lumber. Next to it was a chicken coop built of rough pine boards. There was no fence around the place.

Rich Gray, astride a light-brown, high-stepping horse, came toward the house through the pines. A tall, lean man in his early fifties, he was warmly dressed in heavy work clothes, with hickory-striped trousers tucked into high-top boots. His slouch sombrero shaded his stern features. He spied me immediately, as I came down off the porch, and 3 spurred his horse on to meet me.

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“Who are you?” he snapped, as he brought his mount to a standstill before the cabin door, and swung to the ground.

I told him my name, but before I could make further explanations, he questioned: “And what's your business! We have rules and regulations in this yere camp, and bein as how I'se foremen, I have to know all the business what comes around here!”

After this sudden outburst I explained my presence as best I could and asked his cooperation. For the time being he seemed [appeased?]. Lula had come to the door by this time and was watching interestedly. I noticed then that she was much younger than her husband, and had a rich ginger-cake color and straight black hair.

“So you're another of them government fellers?” continued Rich. “One come here jest last week about that Social Security business. He was a government inspector checking, and asked all kinds of questions; now you come along and want to know about my life. I had to answer enough questions last week.”

He went in the house, after tying his horse to a nearby post. But he came right out again, dragging a chair behind him. He told me to sit down on it, while Lula sat in the rocker and he made himself comfortable on the steps.

In an effort to break the tension I ask Rich where he obtained the fine looking horse he was riding. He said: “Joe? He belong to the company, but I'se been ridin him for 4 the whole five years I'se been yere. He's one good hoss.”

Joe, on hearing his name, pawed the earth with one forefoot and whinnied.

“That's a good lookin saddle he's got on too!”

‘Yep, it ain't bad. Hit's called a 12 inch saddle.”

“About how much territory do you cover each day?”

“I [kivers?] from 20 to 30 acre a day”, he said. “I watch out for fires, and see that the cup doan run ova. I also checks locations for supplies of turpentine what's ready for dippin.

“We works aroun 40 peoples on this still. Some is shippers, and they work in the woods. We only uses trees what's nine inches in diameter. The life of a tree is from four to five year, in this business.

“Clay cups is used on the tress, and they holds anywhar from one quart to one-half gallon. We tries to empty them nigh-on to ever three week, when the sap is runnin. There ain't vera much to do in winter, but work picks up in spring and summa.”

Amazed at his own sudden willingness to discuss his every-day life, he stopped as quickly aa he had started. His former attitude returned, and again he questioned me on the reasons for my visit. But I soon reassured him and he continued: “I see thet the men chip and dip properly in the woods. Some of them receives anywhar from $1.25 to $1.50 a 5 day; it's all accordin to price received for the turpentine on the market. Some of my mens, dip by the thousand, they get 90¢ a thousand. The good ones averages 1500 a day.

“The turpentine is brought from the woods in barrels. After it reaches the still, it ‘ s loaded on the platform you sees over yonder, and dumped into the still under heat. Do ya see thet pipe runnin into the vat? Well, this is run off into the barrels; we don't waste nothin. After hit run into the barrel, it gits hard. The barrels holds 5-15 and 5-20.”

I asked him what he meant by 5-15 and 5-20 and he told me: “Green barrels weigh from 40 to 50 pounds, and after this weight has been deducted from full barrels, then they will run from 450 to 500 pounds of turpentine. We kin go over there to the still after I eats and take a look at hit. Wanna?” I admitted that I would be only too glad to go. Then he and Lula retired indoors for their noon meal. They invited me to join them, but I declined.

Later I asked Rich what foodstuffs he favored most. He told me he preferred meat and vegetables, and added that there was plenty of wild game in the vicinity which he obtained while riding the woods.

When he returned from his meal, we walked the few yards down the settlement road to the turpentine still. It was located near the main highway. [Nearby?] were numbers of galvanized barrels used for shipping the turpentine. The still was substantially built, having a large kiln and condensing 6 vat. The water supply came from a tall water-tower operated by an electric pump. Near the kiln, on a raised platform, were many barrels used in the transportation of the turpentine from woods to still. A long shed, connected with the still, was used for the tool house and storage place for machinery. A small, open shed opposite the barrel stand is used for the distribution of the turpentine. On another side of the still [were?] the refining works and a large pair of scales for weighing the barrels.

On our way back to Rich's shack, we stopped at the little weather-beaten school and church combined. It was of the same construction as the houses and appeared to be poorly equipped. Addie Webb, the teacher, reported an averahe average attendance of 20 pupils. On Sundays, the little school is converted into a church. The Baptists use it one Sunday and the Methodists the next. [?]

When we arrived at the house and seated ourselves comfortably on the front porch, he told me his life history.

“I was borned to Mac and Betty Gray in Robertsville, South Carolina, March 8, 1888. My parents is now dead. I had eight brothers and six sisters; some of them is older than I is, and I haint seen none of them in years. I attended school in Robertsville, but I had to stop when I reached the tenth grade.

“I useter live in Lakelan, and I still owns nearly a 7 half block there on Quincy Street, with houses on it too. I haint gonna tell ya nothin about thet though, my boss done tole me I doan hafter tell nobody thet; nor how much I makes offen them neither.”

With this, Rich rose and went inside again and when he came out he carried a piece of carbon paper in his hand.

“Here,” he said, “take this yere piece of paper and put hit 'tween them papers you'se written on. I still doan take much stock in what you're doin and I want proof about hit when I tells my boss-man. You gimme the other copy fer to keep.

“I shore would be up agin hit iffen I couldn't read nor write on this yere job, cause I have to report everthing; my boss man tells me not to talk.

“I been workin in this camp for five year, but I been in the turpentine biz all my life, follered hit from camp to camp. I now keeps all the records belongin to the company and make out my report to the boss-man.

“Mentionin turpentine camps though, makes me think a Lakelan, a-way back yonder. I can remember when hit warn't nary thing but jest a turpentine camp itself, and how they come out yere to this section and cut and toted away the pines fer to build thet town.

“No, we doan own our house yere, we's only allowed to stay yere as long as we work for this company. But we gets to stay free of charge. None of us folks pays any rent.

Some of them fellers has been workin here fer a long time, ever since hit first started.

“I prefers livin out yere, as to bein in town. We's free out yere, and bein as how I haves what I want, why not? Why worry about town? Some folks kin worry about the funniest

things I ever heard about. Besides, they haint nothin in town. I has regular work here and makes aroun $2.50 a day and sometimes more.

“As fer votin, thet's another thing I haint up to neither. No man! I dont do no votin. A man has to know what he's doin when he goes votin of dealin with pollytics. Lots of fool folks goes votin and don't know what they're votin fer. I aint aimin to fool with hit myself. Uncle Sam knowed what everybody is a-doin, and if you stick your finger in the fire, yor shore to git burned.

“We all goes to church here. I am a Missionary Baptist, but I doan go as often as the rest of the folks. I doan hold no office in the church neither. The folks here goes pretty regular, but not me. That's all there is to do here, is go to church and drink shine.

“But drinkin shine keeps the men well, especially when they gotta work out in them woods in the water, they just gotta have somethin hot in them. Hit seems to keep them from gittin sick too. Of course iffen any of us'uns gits sick, the company pays fer hit and we kin call whatever doctor we 9 wants. This here is checked out of a special fund we carry. But this place is pretty healthy, in spite of the low land. I guess hit's on account of the high pines all aroun us. There's few of the workers what's ever sick, includin me and Lula. I haint been sick in years. Of course some gits sick now and then, but not often.

“Well I reckons hit's about time fer me to be goin on, Joe and me gotta lot of work to do this afternoon. How about comin back when we gits to distillin the turpentine? You'll like thet.”